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ABSTRACT

Several approaches to reading assessment, based on the whole language approach, can provide teachers with a frame of reference to guide them in making decisions about selecting and planning classroom activities. The more traditional approach to reading assessment, usually referred to as reading diagnosis, focuses on the final product (the test scores) and looks for symptoms of underlying reading disorders. Whole language is a theoretical perspective which allows both teachers and students to focus on growth and development in language use and language learning rather than on instruction, conformity or a fixed curriculum. Approaches to reading assessment within the whole language framework include a print awareness task, book handling task, patterned language task, reading interview, miscue analysis, and situational responses to reading. The observations made by teachers using these assessments provide a meaningful alternative to heavy reliance on standardized tests and lead to a more effective educational program for all. (Twelve references are attached.) (RS)

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Reading Assessment from a Whole Language Perspective

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Reading Assessment from a Whole Language Perspective

In recent years a new term has gained popularity in education: Whole Language. Teachers who support this view of education generally have both knowledge and beliefs about language, language learning and the nature of children. Additionally, the attitudes of Whole Language teachers are supportive of language development and growth among their students. Whole Language teachers maintain that children learn best by building on their strengths, not by identifying and isolating their weaknesses, by working from a sense of confidence and competence, not by teaching children what they do not know.

In order to do this, Whole Language teachers must be aware of the development that is occurring in the reading of their students. Yet a contrast is seen between reading diagnosis, which has been characteristic of approaches to reading in the past, and reading assessment, which may be considered characteristic of these teachers. The two approaches represent and reflect differences which exist between more traditional, teacher directed instruction driven by textbooks and skills development and Whole Language, which is child centered and driven by principles of language learning and development.

READING DIAGNOSIS

Reading diagnosis, a term used commonly in the literature of the field, carries with it the underlying premise that something is

"wrong." As defined by Harris and Hodges (1981), reading diagnosis is "the act, or result, of identifying disorders from their symptoms." As a result, the diagnostician looks for problems. In conducting a diagnosis, the reading specialist seeks scores from tests or subtests, determines levels of reading performance and identifies problem areas. That is, the focus is on the final product of the reading, the scores resulting from the tests.

When pursuing information, the teacher is guided in the pursuit by questions, questions which lead to the answers being sought. Those questions may be openly asked and answered, in which case the process is fairly clear and easy to follow for all concerned. Frequently, though, the questions are not overtly identified, sometimes leading to ambiguity about what was learned and what should be done. Regardless of which condition is present, the questions to be answered determine the nature and the direction of the diagnosis. The questions are often similar to the following:

> What level of reading material should be used when teaching this child to read?

> How does this child perform in reading in comparison with other children of similar age or grade placement?

> How well does this child comprehend reading material in response to predetermined questions?

> What are this child's skills in word attack, word recognition and comprehension?

> What are the strengths and weaknesses this reader had when reading?

Questions such as these are best answered by tests, since tests yield scores and levels and rankings comparing students. Three types of tests are commonly used in answering these questions: Norm-referenced tests, to determine how the child compares with other children of similar age or grade placement; criterion-referenced tests to determine the specific skill areas which are or are not yet controlled; and informal tests, to determine the independent reading level, the frustration reading level and the instructional reading level for the student (Gillet & Temple, 1986).

In turn, the results of these tests then form the basis for the teacher to develop an instructional program. Reading materials are selected for the student, often by using a basal reading series, which fall within the level of difficulty that was determined as the child's instructional reading level. Typically, the teacher assigns work which accompanies the reading series, even those activities which were not indicated as weaknesses for the child. In order to make effective use of the materials, the teacher may emphasize those activities which address areas identified as among the child's weaknesses.

In this way, the instructional program for the child, or for a group of children, is determined. It should be noted that the emphasis is on instruction, what is to be taught to or done with the child. Whole Language, in contrast, emphasizes conditions which lead to learning.

READING ASSESSMENT

In contrast to completing a diagnosis, conducting a reading assessment does not mean that the teacher is looking for weaknesses or disorders. Instead, assessment reflects the teacher's efforts to understand how well the child is developing as a reader. The teacher is constantly in the process of assessing the development of the child as a reader. As a result, the questions guiding an assessment from a Whole Language perspective are different from those guiding a diagnosis. The focus is on the how the reader controls the reading process in varying situations or learning contexts.

Depending on the reader's previous development as a reader, the questions are likely to vary from one reader to another, from one setting to another. Yet a core of questions can serve as the basis for selecting which question or questions are appropriate for a given opportunity for assessment:

> What knowledge of the conventions of written language does the child have as a reader?

> How does the child view himself or herself as a reader?

> What would the child like to improve as a reader?

> What does the reader believe reading is? Is it a process of matching letter and sounds? Or is it a process of developing meaning while reading?

> What strategies does the reader think are available when reading?

> Which types of reading situations, if any, does the child approach with a sense of success and confidence?

> How does the reader approach problems when reading?

> What strategies does the reader employ?

> What strengths does the reader bring to reading which can be built on in approaching reading instruction?

The teacher's concerns are not the readability of reading materials, weaknesses the learner may have or the approaches to teaching which should be taken. Difficulty of a text depends on many factors not considered by readability formulae - factors such as interest, prior knowledge, purpose for reading, the situational context in which the reading occurs or the motivation of the reader. Targeting a child's weaknesses as the major thrust of instruction is to be constantly confronting the student with what he/she does not know, a task which can be overwhelming to a student who views himself or herself as a failure at reading already. Teaching is not the major concern for the Whole Language teacher. The teacher's major concern is with the children's learning, learning which may or may not coincide with the "teaching" which may take place. Whereas some models of instruction focus on the teacher, the Whole Language teacher focuses on the learning taking place in the classroom.

This emphasis leads the Whole Language teacher to consider alternate ways of assessing development. Whether it be conducted by a reading specialist or the classroom teacher, the teacher becomes a sensitive, alert "kid watcher" (Goodman, 1978). From the most basic levels of reading development to more advanced levels of development, the teacher watches for reading behaviors as indicators of development:

PRINT AWARENESS TASK: The teacher observes the student dealing with environmental print - such common items as signs, labels, or logos. The teacher may directly observe the children's reactions to such items in the classroom, invites the children to contribute print items for a "things we can read" display or constructs a print awareness task (Goodman & Altwerger, 1981). How do the children respond to these items? Simple concepts, such as directionality, can be noted by watching whether the children indicate direction as they point to "where it says." Do they indicate a left-to-right/top-to-bottom directional movement? Or do they fail to show any pattern of direction consistently, possibly indicating that they have not yet decided on the directional characteristics of print? Do the children respond to one type of print item differently than to another? For example, do the children express sharply stated directions to signs while using informative statements when discussing a label from a food item? What hypotheses about the written language system do children indicate they hold when dealing with environmental print items? One student pointed to a Colgate toothpaste label, pointing letter-by-letter and saying one syllable for each letter pointed to, "COL-GATE COL-GATE COL-GATE-COL" and, when running out of letters before finishing the last "colgate," went to some print on the far right hand side of the label, ending there with the final "GATE." It might be fair to conclude the this student has a syllabic hypothesis of written language, one syllable represented by each letter. Children may hold several different hypotheses, or theories, about the written

language system before arriving at a theory of reading which is fully functional. Such hypotheses may be part of a child's natural development and movement into reading (Ferrario & Taberosky, 1982).

BOOK HANDLING TASK: The way a student handles or talks about a book can tell the teacher much about the knowledge and understanding of the child. How does the student turn the book to begin reading? Is it right-side-up? Does the student turn to the first page of text? Once again, directionality can be noted - top-to-bottom, left-to-right. When asked to point to where we read, does the student point to the text or the picture? While turning from page to page, does the student refer to it as the page or as paper? When asked to point, does the student appropriately identify a word, a letter, an uppercase letter and a period? The possibilities are quite varied. The teacher can observe children as they deal with books available in the room. This is an informal task which the teacher uses to track how the children are developing in their knowledge of books. The Sand - Concepts about Print Test (1972) as discussed in The Early Detection of Reading Difficulty (1986), both by Marie Clay, offer the teacher a published set of materials for sampling the child's knowledge about books with materials that are specifically developed for that purpose. However, teachers can also use trade books at an appropriate level for the child for gathering such information.

PATTERNED LANGUAGE TASK: This task involves the student in responding to or reading a patterned language book (for a bibliography of such books, see Rhodes, 1981;McClure, 1985). Many

of the characteristics of the BOOK HANDLING TASK can also be considered with a PATTERNED LANGUAGE TASK. But beyond those points, this task allows the teacher to determine if the student is able to identify the pattern of the book and to use that knowledge in reading. This task often allows the teacher to identify one type of material where even a student at risk as a young reader can function with a sense of confidence and feeling of success. A book such as Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see? (Martin, 1970) serves as an ideal text for many young readers when using this activity. If the teacher begins reading the book to the child, often the student will begin reading the book before two or three pages have been read.

READING INTERVIEW: This interview contains ten questions which relate to reading but are ambiguous in their meaning (for the text of this interview, see Goodman, Watson and Burke, 1987, pp. 219-220). For example, the first question in the interview is, "When you are reading come to something you don't know, what do you do?" The key word in this question is "something." In responding, the reader must interpret the question and respond in a way that seems appropriate. The reader's response can inform the teacher about what type of problem the student is likely to think can be encountered while reading. It also helps the teacher to understand if the reader thinks of reading as a process which requires sounding out words or developing meaning. By relating the questions to each other and interpreting the responses in light of answers to other responses from the interview, the teacher can gain a fuller

understanding of the child's views of reading. The questions throughout allow the teacher to understand what the student believes reading is and how it is accomplished, what makes a good reader and how the student views himself/herself as a reader.

MISCUE ANALYSIS: This analysis allows the teacher to consider how well the student deals with oral reading when reading a connected text. The reader reads a relatively long, complete passage aloud. The oral reading is recorded and subsequently analyzed (for a description of the procedure as it was first presented for use by teachers, see Goodman and Burke, 1972). This questioning procedure considers how effectively the reader utilizes reading strategies and the cuing systems available while reading. It also considers how effectively the reader applies knowledge of language while reading the text. This procedure has been criticized some in large part because it is too time consuming and difficult for teachers to complete. Yet Goodman, Watson and Burke (1987) have presented alternate procedures to the earlier developed questioning procedure, all of which are intended to reduce the time requirement for the teacher. Additionally, Woodley (1987) has presented a software package for conducting a miscue analysis which greatly reduces the time requirements for completing the procedure. These two publications enable the teacher to use miscue analysis as part of an ongoing assessment program in either the classroom or the clinic by making miscue analysis more practical.

SITUATIONAL RESPONSES TO READING: This task involves the student in dealing with a situation which requires adjusting approaches to

reading to meet the demands of a particular situation. One example of such a situation would be assigning students to prepare for a multiple-choice test based on one particular chapter or set of readings. The teacher then monitors how the student approaches the task. Does the student prepare for the test day by day, or save the reading for a one night cramming session? Does the student take notes from the readings in order to help focus attention and effort? Does the student identify points in the reading that are likely to be used as test items on a multiple choice exam? Such an approach might not always be possible or appropriate. If that is the case, the teacher can present a series of situations and ask the students to discuss what they would do if they face such a situation. For example, one situation might be similar to this:

> You have a history test, a math test, a biology test and a health test on Friday. For history, you have four chapters to read. For math you need to read and understand four sections of one chapter. For biology you have two detailed chapters to read on the physical structure of vertebrae. In health you have one long chapter with detailed information on communicable diseases common during in the United States. It is Tuesday and you have not read the materials assigned for any of these tests. The biology test and the health test will be multiple choice. The math test will require you to perform computation and complete a series of fill-in-the-blank items. The history test is an essay exam. How would you read the assigned materials? How would you

divide your time between the four subjects? Describe what you would do to prepare for the tests on Friday.

While such a situation may not provide an accurate indication of what the student would actually do in such situations, it does inform the teacher of what options the student believes are available and how the student might pick or choose among those options. Also, the teacher can consider whether the student is able to set a clear purpose for reading which meets the specific demands or constraints of the situation. The purposes may vary according to teacher, type of test, control of the subject and past performance in the class.

Such a list of tasks which teachers can use in observing students is not intended to be exhaustive. The particular strengths of the students may dictate completely different tasks or activities. Yet the focus is on trying to understand how the student approaches reading and related activities (e.g., studying).

CONCLUSION

Whole Language is a theoretical perspective which allows both teachers and students to focus on growth and development in language use and language learning rather than on instruction, conformity or a fixed curriculum. When the Whole Language teacher, whether in the classroom, the Chapter 1 reading program or the reading clinic, assesses development in any language area, the focus in on how the student is developing as a language user and as a language learner.

Such a perspective is not new - many teachers have had such an orientation to language and learning for years. Yet the author of

this paper has been dismayed to note the growing power yielded to those who develop and distribute standardized tests. In many places, American education has come to heavily rely on published tests which yield little, if any, information which can be valuable to the teacher in selecting and planning classroom activities. Ultimately, the person who must make decisions regarding student learning is the classroom teacher. Teachers need information on an ongoing basis on which to base decisions about the classroom program.

The approaches to assessment discussed in this paper provide a frame of reference to guide the teacher in observing the students in their classrooms. Such observations provide a meaningful alternative to heavy reliance on standardized tests. These approaches aid the teacher in kid-watching which, in turn, leads to a more effective educational program for all.

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